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Congo: War Is International, Not Local New Report Documents Role Beyond Tribal Conflicts

(New York, July 8, 2003) – The war in Congo has been misdescribed as a local ethnic rivalry when in fact it represents an ongoing struggle for power at the national and international levels, Human Rights Watch said in a new report released today.

The 57-page report, *'Covered in Blood': Ethnically Targeted Violence in Northern DR Congo*, provides evidence that combatants in the Ituri region of northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have slaughtered some five thousand civilians in the last year because of their ethnic affiliation. But the combatants are armed and often directed by the governments of the DRC, Rwanda and Uganda.

A number of treaties and ceasefires, the most recent signed in Burundi on June 19, have supposedly ended the conflict between the governments of Uganda, Rwanda, and the DRC, as well as Congolese rebel movements set to share power with the Kinshasa government. But the minor players—often the proxies for the principals—continue the war.

"Agreements between governments don't do much good when the government armies are just passing their guns on to local militias," said Alison DesForges, Senior Adviser to



the Africa Division of Human Rights Watch. "The crisis in Congo won't be resolved without addressing all levels of this conflict."

The majority of the population in Ituri are neither Hema nor Lendu, the ethnic groups whose militias are responsible for much of the current violence. But all inhabitants of Ituri have been forced to choose sides, and are subject to attack because they are thought to be associated with either Hema or Lendu groups.

In recent months, human rights workers have not had access to rural Ituri or been able to provide information about specific massacres of civilians. But the Human Rights Watch report covering events in the past 12 months presents evidence of, among others, a civilian massacre at Nyakunde in early September 2002, where Lendu combatants slaughtered some 1,200 people of the Hema and related groups. Over a 10-day period, the killers dragged victims from their homes and murdered patients found in beds at a missionary hospital. According to Human Rights Watch research, the Nyakunde massacre claimed significantly more victims than has previously been known.

Uganda occupied Ituri, an area rich in mineral resources and potentially a major source of oil, from 1998 to May 2003, when it withdrew its troops under heavy international pressure. During its occupation, Ugandan soldiers provided arms and military training to different ethnic groups, fostering the spread of an initially limited dispute between Hema and Lendu over land

The DRC government supports and arms the Congolese Rally for Democracy—Liberation Movement (RCD-ML) which often joins in combat with militia of the Lendu and related Ngiti groups. Rwanda backs the RCD-Goma, a movement split from the RCD-ML, that provides aid to the Union of Patriotic Congolese (UPC), a Hema militia group that has recently controlled the Ituri town of Bunia.

The Human Rights Watch report details how combatants tortured and summarily executed political opponents and raped women of rival ethnic groups. They also engaged in such inhumane acts as the mutilation of bodies and cannibalism.

"Violent death is now an everyday occurrence in Ituri," said Des Forges. "Killers have resorted to cannibalism to terrorize people they want to control."

The Human Rights Watch report charges that all groups recruited children, some as young as seven years old, for military service. Local observers describe the fighting forces as "armies of children."

Militia have driven some half a million people from their homes, and looted and burned the dwellings. To weaken their enemies, various militia have impeded deliveries of food or other forms of humanitarian aid to displaced people and others in need, increasing immeasurably the number of civilians dead because of the war. In some thirty cases in recent months they have threatened, beaten, and expelled humanitarian workers.

A United Nations Observer Mission to the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC), present primarily to monitor ceasefire arrangements, had neither the mandate nor the numbers and equipment needed to protect civilians.

After UPC Hema militia slaughtered hundreds of civilians in Bunia in early May, the U.N. Security Council authorized an Interim Emergency Multinational Force to restore order inside the town. The Multinational Force, consisting mostly of French troops, was the first mission ever deployed by the European Union. It has managed to stop killing inside Bunia, but will end its mission in September.

In September, the U.N. force, strengthened by several thousand more soldiers, will be the only international force present in DRC. The Security Council will soon consider the size and mandate for the force.

“The Security Council must ensure that civilians in Bunia and elsewhere will be protected after the interim force leaves,” said Des Forges. “They must provide the peacekeepers and the mandate necessary to prevent further ethnic killing.”

The report is available online at the following location during the embargo period: <http://docs.hrw.org/embargo/ituri/>, using the username “ituri” and access-code “drc0703.”

After embargo, it will be available at: <http://hrw.org/reports/2003/ituri0703/>